



Monkey Magic!



First it was rumoured to be entitled *The Visitor* and set to star nearly all of Hollywood. Then it appeared it wouldn't get made at all. *Empire* looks at the real story behind one of the year's biggest blockbusters.

WORDS SIMON BRAUND



There's nothing scarier than a bunch of Apes doing the Macarena.

On 2 November 2000, in the small desert town of Page, Arizona, the cameras finally rolled on *Planet Of The Apes*. It was a moment that had been a long time coming.

An updated version of the 1968 sci-fi classic had been kicking around Tinseltown for the best part of a decade. Few films have attracted the level of rumour, gossip and speculation that has surrounded *Apes* since a revamp of the franchise was first mooted in 1993, exactly 20 years after the original, five-film series fizzled out with the dismal *Battle For The Planet Of The Apes*. In the intervening years, the twists and turns of the movie's tortuous journey to the screen have been placed under intense scrutiny. Fans of the original seized on every scrap of information as evidence that an act of sacrilege was in progress, while more level-headed punters were fascinated with how the bewildering array of talent variously attached to the project would eventually fall into place. Or, in fact, if they ever would. One thing to emerge from the deluge of scuttlebutt triggered by *Planet Of The Apes* is that it's a bloody miracle the cameras ever rolled at all.

Tim Roth on his character, General Thade: "He's like the shark out of *Jaws*."



In December 1993, Twentieth Century Fox, the studio that produced the original series and which held copyright on the material, gave a tentative go-ahead to a remake. Jane Hamsher, Don Murphy and, most interestingly, Oliver Stone were set to produce; *Mad Max 2*'s Terry Hayes was

Oscar Award-winning Rick Baker adds the finishing touches.



recruited to write the screenplay. Three months later, Arnold Schwarzenegger was on board. It was assumed that the Austrian Oak, then at the height of his box office pulling powers, would resurrect the character of George Taylor, the stranded astronaut played by Charlton Heston in the original. Insiders

“... the choice of Mark Wahlberg raised a few eyebrows.”

insisted that this was not the case and that the proposed film was a radical departure from the original. Rumours began to circulate that Fox were unhappy with the script. Nevertheless, in January 1995, Schwarzenegger approved Phillip Noyce as director and a budget in the region of \$100m was agreed on. A month later, Noyce bailed to direct Val Kilmer in *The Saint*. At this point everything went a bit mad.

First of all, *Home Alone* director Chris Columbus (what were they smoking that day?) was brought in to rewrite the script with *Batman*'s Sam Hamm (Fox's beef was that Hayes's version was too dark and violent – they wanted more *Flintstones* and less *Terminator*, apparently) and to take over as director. Around the same time, James Cameron's name was first mentioned in connection with the film – possibly as a producer. In January 1996, Columbus passed on the directing chores and both Peter Jackson (*The Frighteners*, *The Lord Of The Rings*) and Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*, *Godzilla*) also turned it down.

Cameron, though, was definitely attached, but in an unspecified capacity. More outlandish rumours suggested that Cameron was keen to produce a Schwarzenegger-starring *Planet Of The Apes* through his company Lightstorm Entertainment, to be directed by Robert Rodriguez. Meanwhile, a copy of Hamm's script surfaced, and while it was held to be a vast improvement on Hayes's version, it was still considered pretty risible by *Apes aficionados* (the ruler of the planet, Lord Zaius, was described as “an ape Hugh Hefner”). In December 1997, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, Cameron began to throw his weight around, claiming he would definitely produce the movie for Lightstorm/Twentieth Century Fox. Early the following year, sources close to the project announced that Cameron would write, produce and direct a version of *Apes* that took up where 1973's *Battle* left off. In October 1998 this was dismissed as nonsense by Lightstorm, who claimed that Cameron never wrote a script. Two months later Cameron was officially out of the picture. Whether he quit or was fired by Fox fuelled a furious debate. One scenario had it that the *Titanic*-helmer stormed out after ➤



HELENA BONHAM CARTER

Empire is talking to a chimp. This alone would be strange enough, but what makes it all the more bizarre is that the chimp is talking back. Not only that, it is smoking a cigarette and talking back with Helena Bonham Carter's voice. This is not just strange, it's surreal. And hardly less so given that this is all taking place on the set of Tim Burton's *Planet Of The Apes*, where sundry gorillas are clustered around, munching bagels, or slumped in chairs reading the paper. Bonham Carter's make-up is so fantastically lifelike that it feels far more like you're talking to a chimp with Helena Bonham Carter's voice than you are to Helena Bonham Carter with a chimp's face.

"I'm actually less apelike than some of the others," she says, her English accent slightly slurred by her toothsome ape muzzle. "I would've preferred to be more of an ape, but they wanted to make me look attractive because I'm a semi-love interest for Mark [Wahlberg]." This is now a bit creepy.

"Oh, we don't do it or anything," she laughs. "But we definitely have some sort of connection."

Bonham Carter's transformation is a tribute to Rick Baker's superb make-up. But, she says, there is more to being an ape than simply putting on the mask.

"At first I was horrified because I thought I could be naturalistic. But you can't; you can't rely on your face, which I found fascinating. You have to exaggerate everything so you feel like a really hammy, bad actor. It's hard to concentrate and you can't hear very well. I flunked out of ape school, too," she adds, a little sheepishly. "The ape school was one of the reasons I wanted to do the film. It's such a bonkers thing to do. The guy who taught us, Terry Notary, is a former member of Cirque du Soleil and he taught us lots

of different techniques. But I couldn't stop laughing. I thought that was very chimp-like, but it isn't. I kept getting sent back to start again.

"You tend to think apes are all over the place, but actually they're very co-ordinated and much more sensual than we are. They're much more curious. Of course," she says, "when you've had two hours' sleep and been in the makeup chair for five hours you couldn't care less, you just want to get the scene done."

That said, the daily ordeal of being made a monkey of appears not to have bothered Bonham Carter as much as it did the rest of the simian cast.

"You just adapt to it," she says breezily. "And once you've done it once, every time afterwards it seems to take less time. The hardest thing is to remember it's not the feat of the day. Once it's done you've then got to go to work. None of the human actors can complain about anything because we have to get up at 2.30 and have all this put on." She takes a puff on her cigarette. "I really shouldn't be doing this," she says, "I'm terribly flammable. They did issue me with a really long, 1920s cigarette holder. I looked terribly glamorous but I couldn't get a hit at all. And I can't eat much. You have to eat tiny pieces, like baby food, otherwise you start salivating and it collects behind your upper lip. And I have my teeth in, which are just enormous, so my brain is constantly saying, 'Oh, you've got something in your mouth. Let's salivate!' We're all constantly going like this [*she makes a disgusting slurping noise*]. You know when John Hurt did *The Elephant Man*? I know why he made those noises now. It's nothing to do with his performance. He's only doing it because he's got so much spit in his mouth. It's true." Simon Braund



TIM ROTH

The idea of making a monkey out of himself was positive to Tim Roth. "It's great," he says. "To act with make-up is easy. It feels like a bad headcold for about five months, and you lose your aim with chopsticks and stuff. But I love physical acting and I really enjoy that aspect and try to go all the way with it."

Roth's playing with his two sons after a cooling dip in the Los Angeles afternoon. Literally worlds away from the evil General Thade in *Planet Of The Apes* as he coerces his youngest to occupy himself with a colouring-in book during the *Empire* interview. "Oh him," he says of the character, "he's like *Jaws*—real cold. If he walks into a room, be worried. He may be looking at you and thinking about where to bite a piece out of your head. It was play fun." Character metamorphosis is nothing new to Roth—he's been "simple" (*Meantime*); an American undercover agent (*Reservoir Dogs*); a Shakespearean courier (*Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*); and an eccentric bellboy (*Four Rooms*), to name just a few. A master of accent and language, Roth's role in *Apes* is a far more physical affair. "I love physical acting, and I really try and go all the way with it. A lot of other actors don't like it, but I love it." Ironically it wasn't the lavish project at hand that attracted him to the nasty role of Thade, it was the chance to work with a director he'd admired for quite some time, Tim Burton. "What I liked about him is that amongst this huge budget and enormous sets and stuff, he reminded me of a fully independent filmmaker. Now that his films make money, they just let him be and he seems to be in a very privileged position—yet I'm sure he still has fights every day." Having grown

up watching the short-lived TV series, rather than the hallowed 1968 original, Roth is still bemused as to the phenomenon surrounding this remake. "I just didn't realise how precious it is to people. I think what Tim's done is definitely make it his own—just walking onto some of those sets, I was saying to myself 'I'm definitely in a Burton film', I'd try and be on the set as much as possible to watch what he was doing—especially in the battle sequences, as I wanted to see how he blended the effects with the real thing. He always wanted to go for the real thing." For Roth, watching Burton at work will no doubt be invaluable for his next directorial effort after 1999's *The War Zone*. The project is a reworking of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that he's currently constructing with writer/director Harold Pinter. "To be honest, this is a difficult project as I want to shoot in very far-off locations, and the script's very, very dark. I've got financiers looking at it, we'll just see if they've got the guts to make it." Roth continues, "You know, if you're lucky, you get to make 10 films as a director in your life, depending on how long you live—so they have to count. But as an actor, you can make five films a year. Some will be crap, some will be okay—but it's quicker and there's less commitment. They're not my films anyway, they're the director's." Roth's philosophy is simple. "I try and keep it interesting for me. If I keep it selfish, then an audience will find it interesting." With a chuckle in his voice, he explains further. "If I start to nod off, an audience will see that—I've got some crap comin' out, you'll see... but I'm hoping there's some good to balance that. It's all about having fun, plus I always hang out with the crew, that's where I learn the most." **Chris Murray**

being presented with yet another version of the script by Graham Yost (*Speed*, *Mission To Mars*). Naturally, this is hotly denied by other sources.

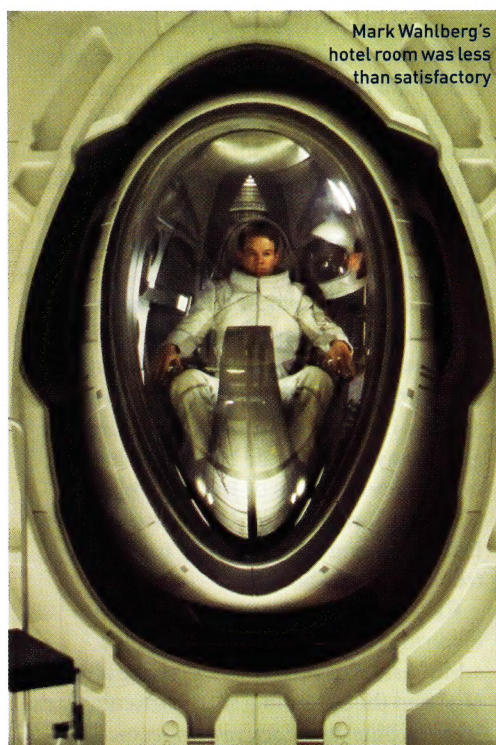
Whatever the truth of the matter, with Cameron out, the heat surrounding the project cooled considerably. A new school of thought maintained that the film was now effectively dead. However, in January 1999, the word on the street was that *Se7en* scribe Andrew Kevin Walker had taken a crack at *Apes* and that Fox were extremely excited about the results. Somewhat inevitably, the names Jerry Bruckheimer and Michael Bay were bandied around as producer and director respectively. The only mystery here is why no one thought to attach them sooner. Of course, this proved another dead end, but it was an indication of life in the old ape yet.

That seems to be confirmed in February 2000 when yet another script turned up, this one by William Broyles, Jr (*Apollo 13*, *Cast Away*), and reports filtered through that Fox were negotiating with both Frank Darabont and Tim Burton to direct. The rumours firmed up when it was announced on 21 March that Richard Zanuck, former head of Twentieth Century Fox and the man who greenlit the original, would produce a new version of *Planet Of The Apes*. The next day, *Variety* confirmed that Tim Burton would direct.

Of course, the choice of Burton provoked renewed howls of anguish from the purists. Even multi-Oscar-winning make-up artist Rick Baker, who was approached to create the crucial ape make-ups (Stan Winstone had already done a great deal of design work when Oliver Stone was in the producer's chair), expressed some trepidation.

"It concerned me a little bit that Tim has a very definite visual style," he says. "I like it actually, but I didn't think it necessarily suited *Planet Of The Apes*. I was afraid he was going to have black and white checks on the floor and apes with striped socks and white faces with black circles under their eyes. I said, 'If that's the kind of thing you want to do, I don't think I want to do it.' " With the steady stream of images that have emerged from the production over the past six months it's obvious now that Baker's fears were unfounded. The apes look incredibly real, their faces full of character and expression. Needless to say they are light-years away from John Chambers' work on the original, although, as Baker is quick to point out, Chambers' apes were groundbreaking for their time.

At time of writing, plot details are still somewhat sketchy. But Burton is adamant on one point. "I wasn't interested in doing a remake or a sequel to *Planet Of The Apes*,"



Mark Wahlberg's hotel room was less than satisfactory



Burton: "You've got the bib, the lobster's just there."



Helena Bonham Carter was distraught that she was "less apelike than the others."

"One thing to emerge is that it's a bloody miracle the cameras ever rolled at all."

he says. "But I was intrigued by the idea of revisiting that world. Like a lot of people I was affected by the original. It's like a good myth or a fairytale that stays with you. The idea of reimagining that mythology is very exciting to me." Nevertheless, Burton's version is closer to the original film (and the Pierre Boulle novel, *Monkey Planet*, the well-spring for all things Ape) than sceptics dared to hope. It certainly rejects the more outlandish aspects of earlier scripts and the planet ruled by hostile simians where

humans are oppressed or enslaved has a familiar ring, as does the human uprising sparked by Wahlberg's marooned astronaut. The big departure though is that the planet is not Earth. This has, perhaps, been the cause of more rampant cogitation than any other aspect of the film. Ever since a remake – sorry, "reimagining" – was mooted the big question has been exactly which national monument, a symbol of man's colossal arrogance and self-destructive urges, would be pictured

protruding from the sand at the end?

"Whenever you mention *Planet Of The Apes*," says Richard Zanuck, sitting on a director's chair amid the dense foliage and rocky outcrops of Ape City, one of the mind-boggling soundstage sets built for the movie, "everyone always talks about the Statue Of Liberty. In the history of film it's probably one of the five or six greatest, most memorable, surprising and impactful endings ever." Many observers would narrow the field somewhat. Charlton Heston himself claims that it's the greatest movie ending of all time and the clamour over how this film will top it comes as no surprise.

"It's impossible to top it," admits Zanuck, "but we're going to have a very surprising finish, a very satisfying and entertaining finish. We're not dealing with any philosophical questions in the way the original did. It'll be just as surprising, but more entertaining than intellectually provocative."

According to Zanuck, the second most popular topic of conversation whenever he mentioned a *Planet Of The Apes* remake was Charlton Heston. Again Heston, as cynical spacetraveller George Taylor, is an icon (his wry planting of a tiny American flag on the "alien" planet is as celebrated as the finale in some quarters) and, as such, a sacred cow for diehard *Apes* fans. "When anyone asked me who was playing Heston's part," says Zanuck, "I said, 'No one, it's a whole different idea.'" Even so, the choice of Mark Wahlberg [as Leo Davidson] raised a few eyebrows. But even the most curmudgeonly Chuck worshipper has to admit he fits the bill more snugly than Matt Damon, Ben Affleck or Leonardo DiCaprio, all of whom were in the frame at one time or another.

"Actually, we thought of Mark first off," counters Zanuck. "And why not? He's an up-and-coming star; he's proven that with each performance, and he's a fine actor. We needed someone his age, we wanted someone on the rise and with the shape he's in he looks like an astronaut." In fact, Wahlberg pumped up so much for the role that Burton had to tell him to lose some muscle. Even so, and with Burton's version evidently veering more in the direction of action than philosophical musings, Wahlberg makes perfect sense. With a movie shorn of the intellectual aspirations of the original (and let's face it, intellectual aspirations disappeared from mainstream movies long before this one came along), but resplendent in all the fx trickery a \$US100 million budget can buy, the last thing you're looking for in a leading man is existential angst. And if Wahlberg can't kick chimp ass who can?

The rest of the cast is just about flawless – Helena Bonham Carter as chattering-class, ➤



"Okay, I'll cut that line about being a monkey's uncle."



"What do you mean shoulder pads went out in the '80s?"

humans' lib activist chimp Ari; Tim Roth as the despotic General Thade ("Definitely the villain of the piece," says Burton. "And a really clear-cut villain"); Kris Kristofferson as downtrodden tribal elder Karubi; the superhot Estella Warren as his daughter Daena; and the colossal Michael Clarke Duncan as fearsome gorilla army chief Colonel Attar. Some intriguing cameos are also on the cards. It's confirmed that Charlton Heston appears, unrecognisable as the sage old ape whose dying breath carries the key to the planet's terrible past, and his 1968 co-star Linda Harrison once again plays a renegade human. Whether more juicy rumours of Johnny Depp, George Clooney, Paul Reubens and Spike Jonze popping up in monkey masks are true remains to be seen.

Rick Baker's make-up is truly awe-inspiring (there's little doubt he'll be adding another Oscar to the six he already has) and the sprawling sets, particularly the labyrinthine Ape City, are a spectacular tribute to Burton's genius for production design. Naturally, there will be a few cries of "Goddamn you all to hell!" now the film has unspooled in the US on July 27, but Burton is ready for them.

"The original has a life of its own," he says, "and we're trying to be respectful of it. We hope to keep the essence of the original but inhabit that world in a different way." An unnamed extra puts it more succinctly.

"Dude, you ain't seen nothin' like a big-ass ape soldier comin' your way, 6'5" and 330 with a mean-ass mask and full armour. Scary as Hell! This movie is gonna whomp ass!" It might just rule the planet, too.

◆ *Planet Of The Apes* is released on August 9 and will be reviewed in the next issue.

THE APE REVOLUTION: a brief history



PLANET OF THE APES (1968)

This is where it all began; two spacemen crash-land on a strange planet where humans (with seemingly no intelligence) are the hunted and Apes wear the pants. Fortunately, Heston lost voice for a while; a certain Dr Zaius ruled with an orange fist and boy, could those chimps kiss...



BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES (1970)

Since Heston never told Earth what was going on, a rescue party is sent and the whole bloody thing starts again. This time, a bunch of loony "intelligent" humans are found underground worshipping an unexploded nuclear bomb. As you'd expect, Heston just has to press that big red button...



ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES (1971)

It seems that not all the Apes died in the aforementioned nuclear explosion. Three manage to not only escape, but fall through a time warp into the '70s. After a whirlwind tour of New York the feds get suspicious and kill 'em. But "junior" chimp runs off to the circus...



CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (1972)

Little "Caesar" grows up and the year is 2010 - Apes are no longer amusements, but working slaves. Caesar, the only ape who can talk, collects a truckload of guns and starts a "gorilla" war upon the human society. One of the more "interesting" sequels.



BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES (1973)

Pseudo-flashback-style farce that re-uses previous footage while a lecture is given to a group of Ape students on their hero "Caesar". In an attempt to bring the entire series full circle, any other idea of plot was completely forgotten. Quickly followed by a short-lived TV series (14 episodes).